

Use of Alcohol and Drugs and the Religious Discipline of the Buddha

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Prolegomena

By the time Sakyamuni Buddha, a pioneer in the world religions of today, started his religious mission in India more than twenty-five centuries ago, Indian culture had propagated the use of high quality intoxicants in their religious festivities. The use of **Soma** in the sacrificial activities of the early Vedic religion is evidence of this. As a gift that humans could make to the divine who were believed to be well above them, alcohol perhaps was at a premium. The gods would be most pleased and therefore be both mercifully and generously disposed towards their subordinate followers.

Humans also would have equally well known that all intoxicants give them a fictitious sense of super strength. This is probably why in the creation of divine myths the Vedic Indians made their mighty Indra, the Thunder God who brings about rain, drink lakes and lakes of the intoxicating drink Soma before he prepares himself adequately to fight the dragon Vātra who held the rain clouds in illegal custody.

Whether through pious religious veneration and association with gods or through a mis-directed sense of social elitism, high-powered intoxicants have acquired a very high premium in the history of mankind. Underneath this voluntarily brought about drunkenness, real or imaginary, semi or total, is also a submergence of real powers of human judgement, which man at times chooses to surrender to enable him to do irrational deeds. Fortunate or unfortunate, aided at times also through religious sanctions, alcohol has undoubtedly come to play a very big part in human life.

Today, whether proved by medical science to be generally injurious to human health or not, or whether excess of intoxicants is frowned upon by decent civilized society as shattering acceptable norms of human behaviour, alcohol has come to stay as uncrowned kings and queens, whether within monarchies or republics. In any place anywhere, the king-makers and power-block-builders of the world today are the money handlers, the men who have control over world trade. They are the people who preside over the production [not merely produce] of basic needs of food, clothing, medicine and shelter.

Expansion of human needs -- basic and peripheral

Through the millennia, particularly the second one, human needs have extended very much beyond these. Humans have been taught to learn about a larger territory of needs, gullibly accepting them, unmindful of their usefulness or destructiveness. Peripheral or otherwise to what we might call dignified human living, alcohol and narcotics occupy today an unduly large segment of these. We know, for example, both the story and history of tobacco and marijuana at world level today, in the larger and smaller continents.

Intoxicants sell so well. So do narcotics. Humans have been taught that they are the invariable comfort and solace providers to everyone, equally well to the young and the old. They are today the inseparable status symbols of social elitism. It has been said some where by some one that **To err is human and to forgive divine**. But in the commercially dominated world today, under the terrorizing reign of the media, it deserves to be updated to read as **To be fooled into believing is divine**. This is what the media is globally doing the world over today. We enjoy being led into this situation.

Alcohol, tobacco and narcotics play the tune at world level and the whole world, with the political power-wielders who are propped up by them, ceaselessly dance to that tune. Like in the story of Pied Piper of Hamlyn, the entire gang of men, women and children, all join them. This is unbelievably a perpetuation of

crime against humanity, against men, women and children. Any battle honestly fought against them has necessarily to be a battle in defense of humanity.

Political power, assistance and aggressiveness

The situation is much worse, we believe, in economically less well off countries who are unfortunately called under-developed [or undeveloped] who have to stretch out a hand to the World Bank or the I.M.F. for aid grants. The way each country plans its economic development is often determined by the donors. What are generally called world religions are known to possess their own cultural blue-prints in terms of which alone they would sanction development, economic, social or any other, within their territories.

Watchful live religions which are well outside this terrorist grip of economic aid grants are known to keep a vigilant eye over their economic, i.e. industrial and agricultural development. They would not permit infringement on their religious and cultural values. They would stubbornly resist any inroads into them. If anything to the contrary is happening, even surreptitiously, at world level, we would call this a gross violation of fundamental human rights.

But many smaller countries in their own politico-economic sophistication, than in their economic helplessness, yield into this world-wide temptation of anything at any cost. It is at this stage that we would dare to step in to gather together retrospectively as to what Buddhist values are on these issues and to examine the extent to which they could, with sanity and sobriety, be utilized in a long-term development policy. In our opinion, any battle waged against alcohol and drugs is the first stage in foundation laying for national development.

Some may pooh-pooh what is called national development as being parochial or narrow-minded. But we strongly feel that so-called internationalism is no more than an explosive secret pipe line laid beneath the surface, leaving very little chance of survival for the smaller cultural groups in the world with specific identities of their own. Buddhist values aim at universal human well-being. No

political empires, religious or secular. Neither economic kingdoms with fiercely guarded battle fronts.

Buddhism aims at Universal Human Uplift

These prefatory and preliminary remarks on this subject at world level have been deliberately made because we as Buddhists feel the need to relate these problems to humanity as a whole at world level, without any creed loyalties to religious groups or without any identities with larger world ethnic groups or political blocs. What is basically injurious to human well-being at the basic psycho-physical level, or to the moral tone of humanity as a collective whole are not acceptable to Buddhist thinking on any account. Economic policies of political theorists cannot be allowed to override these considerations.

Basic Buddhist texts of the Dhamma which deal with the good life of humans in relation to their religious aspirations for the attainment of Nirvana as well as the codified law of the Vinaya which deals with the legalized aspect of Buddhist monastic life deal with this question of drugs and alcohol with equal seriousness. With the lay community, it is the last of the five basic precepts of the **Pañcasīla** laid down for the regulation of their inter-personal relationships, here and now in this very life. Buddhism ties up the collapse of the observance of the **Pañcasīla** with total social ruin that humans are likely to bring upon themselves. Connected with this social breakdown is also the spiritual degeneracy which invariably impairs their transcendental Nirvanic aspirations [Dhammapada vv. 246-7].

In the Vinaya, use of alcohol by monks is declared an offence [an offence of a relatively minor grade. See Vin. IV. 109 f.]. In both cases the main thrust is on the danger to the sanity of judgement which humans are called upon to make in their day to day living. " Should one drink or take in something which impairs one's power of saner judgement - *Api nu kho bhikkhave taṃ pātabbaṃ yaṃ pivitvā visaññī assa?*" This is how the Buddha questions his disciples on the use of alcohol. There is not much doubt about the identity of what is forbidden here.

The intake of all items of alcoholic and intoxicating drinks which impairs judgement [*visaññī*] is questioned [*api nu kho bhikkhave taṃ pātatabbaṃ*]. The word *pātatabbaṃ* which means to drink undoubtedly also includes the intake through inhalation like smoking [Note uses like *dhūmaṃ pātuṃ* = take in smoke].

The **Pañcasīla** or the layman's five basic precepts, we have already indicated, include this abstinence from intoxicants and drugs as its last injunction. Studies on this **Pañcasīla** has indicated to us the need, as pointed out by the Buddha himself, to observe and fulfill their requirements in their totality, without fragmentation and without any claim for superiority for the observance of any selected precept. Therefore we would do well to present the **Pañcasīla** as a whole with that emphasis.

Inter-personal Harmony through Pañcasīla

From a remarkably valuable societal assessment, this pentad of the **Pañcasīla** is presented as a twin concept of profound significance. It is clearly understood that the breach of any single item of this pentad does put society out of gear, both individually and collectively, into a position of fear and dread. For this reason, associated with **Pañcasīla**, we use the word *pañca-bhayāni* or **five-fold dreads**. Buddhism looks upon this as a gross violation of **Fundamental Human Rights**. Neither individuals nor groups, massive or not so massive in their political, religious or ethnic identities, can be guilty of imposing on any group of other humans such states of concern and instability. It is for the prevention of such acts of violence and vulgarity that world nations must unite, by whatever name they exist.

From the point of view of the doer of these evil acts of anti-social behavior, Buddhist religious beliefs holds him to be harbouring enmity towards his fellow beings. Such behaviour which is inimical to others is undoubtedly self-corrosive and is referred to as *pañca-verāni* [**five-fold enmities**]. Viewed collectively from both these angles, the miscreant who does not keep the **Pañcasīla** intact and

immaculate is labeled in the Buddhist community as a social villain. His life after death, one has to expect, to be one of damnation.

*Appahāya pañca-verāni dussīlo iti vuccati
kāyassa bheda duppañño nirayaṃ so upapajjati.* AN. III. 205

It is all too well known that the first four injunctions of this pentad deal with i. respect for life [all life including that of animals], ii. respect for the ownership of legitimately owned possessions of others, iii. respectful and courteous behaviour of men and women towards each other, with adequate sense of decency and propriety, and iv. trustworthiness of speech at all levels, in private and in public.

It is our Buddhist belief that these **Pañcasīla** virtues have to be thoroughly integrated with honesty and sincerity for the achievement of any meaningful social coherence. It is excellent when they are practised and implemented with a built-in sense of social awareness. We have found to our very great delight, at least some of these being practised in many parts of the world, under such captions as **Neighbourhood Watch Area** in Australia, US.A. and elsewhere. What a delightful collectivist respect for the property of others ! Why not everywhere?

This same urgent need exists today, more than ever before, for mutual respect between the sexes, the men and the women. Believe it or not, that pride of place was given to the woman in India in very early times, at least in the saner segments, where the ancient **Law Book** called the **Manusmṛiti** declared that the woman was created for the continuation of the human progeny [*prajānārthaṃ striyah sūṭhāh* Manu IX. 96]. She was the progenitor, even for the test-tube babies of today [a woman even offering to be the surrogate mother for a non-bearing woman]. Therefore she was to get a fair and just treatment equal to the man [*tasmād sādharmaṇah dharmah saha patnyā udīritah* Ibid.]. It was also in part to safeguard the rightful place of the woman that Buddhism introduces this third precept of the pentad.

With this in-built third precept of the pentad, of mutual respect between the sexes [of not violating boundaries of sexual propriety] there shall be no assaults whatsoever on the woman, in the home, office or anywhere. No more need of miniature fire arms in ladies hand bags for self-defence. Neither widow-burning nor killing of women in order to safeguard family or clan prestige. The world would never have had the need to set up feminist activist groups to fight for and safeguard their own private rights, as it were.

Coming to the fourth precept of the **Pañcasīla**, we have honesty in speech or *musāvādā-veramaṇī*. Honesty perhaps is an overall virtue, backing up almost all other virtues. **To thine own self be true** [*attā te purisa jānāti saccaṃ vā yadi vā musā*] is a good starting point in any one's life. All moral goodness begin, it could be said, with honesty to oneself. Self-deception leads to no more than an empty shell within oneself. In the absence of honesty to oneself, there shall indeed be no starting point for self-correction and self-growth. There can be no social superstructures without honesty among its membership. No one shall deceive another [*Na paro paraṃ nikubbethā*]. Trustworthiness shall uphold all social contracts. All evil spring from dishonesty, out of the man who has outstepped all bounds of honesty and truthfulness.

*Ekam dhammaṃ atītassa musāvādissa jantuno
vitiṇṇaparalokassa natthi pāpaṃ akāriyaṃ.* Dhammapada v. 176

There is no evil that cannot be done by the liar who has transgressed the law of truthfulness and who is indifferent to a world beyond.

In Buddhism, these four precepts which we have discussed so far, together with the one pertaining to abstinence from alcohol and drugs, form the bed rock for the much needed moral grounding as a prelude to the spiritual take off. That provides the launch-pad and looks after the necessary count down without which there shall be no real religious ascent.

Sanity of judgement and the role of the Mind

The Buddhist psycho-ethical approach to spirituality seems to go even beyond honesty and look upon sanity and sobriety of judgement as the first and foremost basic requirement for the launching of any spiritual development. The mind being according to Buddhism the fore-runner of all mental processes [*mano-pubbaṅgamā dhammā* Dh. 1 and 2], it is vital to keep one's mind, i.e. the operational basis of all thinking, in perfect equilibrium, in unbiased working condition, with its judgemental capacity or *saññā* at its best. The loss of this capacity is precisely referred to as *vi+ saññā* or loss or absence of judgemental power.

Buddhism considers this loss of judgemental power as one of the most pernicious evil effects of the intake of alcohol and drugs [*surā-meraya-majja-pamādaṭṭhāna*]. We have already stated above that, in the Buddha's own words, one loses one's sense of judgement with the intake of these [*yaṃ pivitvā visaññāssa*]. With this grim reminder, grim because of its socially and morally evil consequences, both monk and layman are brought under the jurisdiction of this injunction. Use of alcohol brings a *upasampanna* monk [i.e. one of senior status] under the guilt of a **Pācittiya** offence. As for the layman's unethical behaviour in violating this fifth precept, or any items of the **Pañcasīla** at that, Buddhism exercises no legal authority over them. It is the wisdom and sanity of the state which must prevail over this territory, when and where necessary. Law enforcement in these areas by the state has become today a questionable issue in terms of neo-fantastic concepts of human rights.

The Sigāla [or Singālovada] Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya [DN. III. 180 ff.] is generally considered a standard manual on Buddhist ethics for the lay community. This sutta has a special section on **the evils of drinking** [*Cha kho ' me gahapatiputta ādīnavā surāmeraya-majjapamādaṭṭhānuyoge*]. The problem is viewed from three distinct angles of social, economic and hygienic considerations which together total up to six. Let us take a look. Item 1 deals with draining one's

economic resources here and now [*sandiṭṭhikā dhanañjānī*]. 2, 4 and 5 touch on **social aspects of life** and deal respectively with increase of quarrels and strifes [*kalahappavaḍḍhanī*], loss of reputation [*akitti-sañjananī*] and total elimination of one's sense of shame and decency [*kopīna-niddamsanī*]. Items 3 and 6 handle in turn **health of body and mind**. No. 3 specifically refers to the body's proneness to disease through the intake of alcohol [*rogānaṃ āyatanaṃ*]. Finally No. 6 refers to weakening of one's wisdom or brain power [*paññāya-dubbalīkaraṇī*].

This specialized handling in this manner of the fifth precept of the **Pañcasīla** of abstinence from alcohol and drugs in the Sigāla Sūta has come, according to what we have discovered, to win special applause from the then known entire Buddhist world. A very vibrant live tradition has emerged in the Buddhist world out of this watchful handling of the use of alcohol by men and women in their daily life. Under No. 5 of the evils of drinking comes this one of loss of one's sense of shame and decency [*kopīna-niddamsana* | Through voluntary or involuntary exposure of normally covered parts of the body.].

For some obvious reason, the Commentarial explanations which are preserved for us today in the Sumangalavilāsinī [DA. III. 945] are seen to have been actively holding sway in the Buddhist world from times much anterior to the written word of the Commentator Buddhaghosa of the fifth century A.D. It is to be seriously noted that Commentarial notes to Buddhist texts are not always necessarily products of a later generation. Where the clarity of a statement with regard to their creed was in doubt, the ancient masters appear to have seen to it that all ambiguities are cleared before the texts are transmitted to posterity.

Buddhist Culture International at world level

In recent years, at Musée Guimet in Paris, we had the good fortune to lay hands on a sculptured Buddhist panel [Height 6.5 inches] from Hadda in South Afghanistan which carries the caption **Family drinking-scene of five figures**. It is of absorbing interest. On a careful scrutiny of this delightful Buddhist sculpture in

The **Buddhist Art of Gandhara** by Sir John Marshall [Cambridge University Press 1960 / First Indian Edition 1980], we discovered the presence of two more pieces [of similar size] on the same theme of **Family drinking-scene**. One is said to be at Kabul Museum [Figure 50 in Sir John Marshall's book. Size 6.5 inches]. There is yet another on this vitally important theme at Lahore Museum [Fig. 51 Ibid. Size 9.25 inches]. These are believed to belong to a period about 2nd century A.D.

Discovering these items to belong to such a time period and to a region so far removed from the original home of Buddhism, we are not surprised that their identification presented considerable difficulties to the archaeologists and art historians. See what Sir John has to say by way of comment [Ibid. p. 33].

"The artists of the Early Indian School in Mālwā who were commissioned to carve the gateways of the Great Stūpa at Sānchi, did not hesitate to include among their reliefs **scenes of sensuous and erotic character which were flagrantly opposed to the first principles of Buddhist teaching**. ... At that time a favourite theme of Graeco-Parthian secular art was **the drinking-scene, and incongruous as it may seem**, this was one of the earliest themes to be adopted for the decoration of Buddhist stūpas" [Emphasis is mine.].

As students of Buddhism and Buddhist culture, we think differently. To us a drinking scene implies the use of intoxicating alcoholic drinks. And inevitably drunkenness follows, at which point of time nobody knows for certain. Not even the medical men. That is why they do not normally recommend **one for the road**. The Buddhists, because of their religio-ethical needs, as we have already stressed above, had to be particularly heedful of the general impact of alcohol on humans. They accept the position that alcohol, resulting in drunkenness, impairs judgement.

Much more than a stress on the economic and hygienic considerations regarding intake of alcohol, the Buddhists seem to have considered social stigmatization, and that publicized in a big way, is a much more effective weapon

in fighting proneness to the use of alcohol, both by men and women.

The miniature panel we see today in Musée Guimet was framed in a flight of steps leading to a stūpa in Hadda in South Afghanistan. The time period to which it belongs is about 2nd century A.D. Archaeological remains of even broken Buddha images belonging to this area and to this time period [these seen again in the Musée Guimet] convinces us of the wide-spread existence of Buddhism in this area. It also impresses us of the depth of conviction and the degree of admiration in which they held this so immensely socially relevant religion in their day to day life. The Buddhists of that region apparently did not mind lavishly spending on works of art through which they could communicate to the others the message of their religion.

The three stone carvings to which we refer here, all seem to derive their theme and inspiration from the instructions given in the Sigāla Sutta and its Commentary on the evils of drinking. We believe that a very vibrant explanatory commentarial tradition seems to have gone along with the text [i. e. the early Pāli and its Aṭṭhakathā, or perhaps even the same rendered into any other language like Buddhist Sanskrit]. These could both have been jointly transmitted orally from very early times. The stories of Buddha Dīpamkara and Ascetic Sumedha tradition preserved in works of art in Afghanistan at this relatively early date also possibly could go back to a similar source.

The courage and conviction to display in public, and in places of worship like stūpas at that, reveal the genuine spirit of religious propagation for the benefit and betterment of one's fellow humans on earth. These definitely do not aim at mass conversions in the name of any creed. The inspiration for the creation of these sculptured scenes which we reproduce in this article, seems to have been derived by those who sponsored them through their religious traditions [written down or oral, we are not quite certain.].

The Sigāla Sutta's reference to loss of a sense of decency and shame [in

baring one's nakedness = *kopīna-niddamsanī* as a result of drunkenness is picked up and commented on with a forthright candidness in the Commentary **Sumanglavilāsini** [DA. III. 945]. For the benefit of those who can read the Pali we give here the quotation in full: *Kopīna-nidamsanī ' ti guyha-ṭhānaṃ hi vivariyamānaṃ hirim kopeti vināseti tasmā kopīnan ' ti vuccati. Surā-mada-mattā ca taṃ taṃ aṅgaṃ vivarivā vicaranti. Tena tesam sā surā kopīnassa nidamsanato kopīna-nidamsanī ' ti vuccati.* Those who are under the influence of alcohol go about laying bare their nakedness, displaying parts of their bodies, i.e. genitalia which are normally kept covered. Alcohol destroys their sense of decency and shame. Therefore alcohol is referred to as **Displayer of hidden parts of the body / Destroyer of one's sense of decency and shame.**

Figure 49 from Hadda presents the rather middle-aged mother and father in their drinking mood, with their garments [the man's trouser and the woman's skirt] dropping well below the required level of wear, exposing their genitals. The presence of the young child in their midst and the musician couple by their side heightens the effect that this is a public scene.

Figure 50, also from Hadda, now in the Kabul Museum, is equally eloquent. Here two couples are portrayed in the act of drinking, also with a child in between. Note the sculptor's courageous portrayal of the scene, in Sir John's own observations. " Instead of a tunic, the younger man has a *himation*, **which his wife is holding open so as to leave his body exposed to view.** " [Sir John p. 39]. No mistake about this deliberate and joint exposure of the man's nakedness.

Figure 51 is now in the Lahore Museum. It is perhaps an unsuspected and an over-intimate back-stage scene. But being so painstakingly carved in stone, we presume it is certainly meant to be publicized. Here is a brief tour-guide note from Sir John. " The distinctive pose of the two women, with their exposed backs and buttocks..." loc. cit.

We have no doubt whatsoever, that these works of art, associated with

places of religious worship, carry with them a very high didactic note. They wish to deliver to and share with their fellow-religionists the convictions of their faith. The message is also so publicly vibrant that it could also serve all onlookers.

Finally we would say that the message is ' alcohol and drugs rob life of its evenness of tenor.'

